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ABSTRACT

To outsiders, the role of school superintendent has always been a little mystifying. This digest examines how superintendents are responding to their changing environment, what leadership strategies they are using, and whether the superintendency is in a state of crisis. Although fears exist of a dwindling pool of applicants, studies have shown that the average tenure of a superintendent is at least 5 years and that many are largely confident and committed, if sometimes frustrated. Superintendents have to balance instructional, political, and managerial roles, all of which are necessary and sometimes conflicting. The Elementary and Secondary Education Act will change the work of superintendents by making testing an annual event, widening the gap between accountability and authority, heightening the superintendent's instructional role, and affecting their relationship with the school board of education. Superintendents can act as instructional leaders by focusing professional development on instructional issues and basing principal evaluation on instructional improvement. The superintendent's role can be strengthened by having universities revise leadership preparation programs to provide district leaders with practical knowledge and skills, having school boards work with superintendents to clarify expectations for performance and evaluation, and having policymakers explore ways to balance the accountability-authority equation. (Contains 12 references.) (RT)

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The Superintendent in an Age of Accountability

By Larry Lashway

To outsiders, the role of the school superintendent has always been a little mystifying. Most people can explain that the superintendent is the ultimate "person in charge," but what superintendents actually *do* remains vague.

In truth, superintendents themselves may sometimes wonder. Their once imposing authority has eroded considerably in the last several decades. State and federal policymakers have not hesitated to impose major mandates on districts, and a variety of special-interest groups have become assertive about advancing their agenda through the schools. Parents and teachers are more inclined to demand a seat at the decision-making table, and a growing number of charter schools are public but not fully answerable to the district. Most of all, standards-based accountability has made reform not just the trademark of progressive superintendents but a minimum expectation for the job.

How are superintendents responding to their changed environment? What leadership strategies are they using? Is the superintendency in a state of crisis, as some assert, or is it just adapting to fit the times? This *Digest* examines those questions.

Are Superintendents an Endangered Species?

The language of crisis pervades many discussions of the superintendency, and at first glance it would be easy to agree. Paul Houston, executive director of the American Association of School Administrators, says, "The job is impossible, the expectations are inappropriate, the training is inadequate, and the pipeline is inverted."

Houston cites a number of trends that have made district leadership so difficult: changing demographics and growing diversity, a fragmenting culture, deregulation in the form of vouchers and charter schools, decentralization of power, and increased accountability with no additional authority.

As the complexity of the job has increased, so have fears of a dwindling pool of qualified leaders. Bruce Cooper and colleagues (2000) found that almost 90 percent of the superintendents they surveyed agreed that "the applicant shortage represents a crisis in the superintendency." The Institute of Educational Leadership has portrayed the urban superintendency as a merry-go-round with an average tenure of less than three years (Task Force on School District Leadership 2001).

This seemingly grim assessment does not tell the whole story, however. Other studies have indicated that the average tenure of superintendents is at least five years, even in supposedly volatile urban settings (National School Boards Association 2002; Thomas Glass and colleagues 2000). While almost a quarter serve less than three years, the majority appear to have a reasonable amount of time to make an impact on their districts.

In addition, surveys reveal a district leadership cadre that is largely confident and committed, if sometimes frustrated. For example, 69 percent of superintendents in a Public Agenda survey agreed that "with the right leadership, even the most troubled school districts can be turned around" (Steve Farkas and colleagues 2001). Glass and colleagues found that only 6 percent of their sample said they derived little or no satisfaction from their jobs.

Houston probably speaks for many when he observes that the superintendency is less a job than a calling. The opportunity to "shape the lives of children in profound ways" is powerful compensation for all the frustrations.

How Do Superintendents Lead?

How do superintendents navigate through the leadership maze? Arguing that "conflict is the DNA of the superintendency," Larry Cuban (1998) says that superintendents struggle to create coherence out of the numerous and sometimes incompatible goals that the public sets for schools. Expected to improve the system, but lacking direct control over the classroom, "most district administrators have to create their own personal cause-effect models and rely on luck."

Cuban notes that superintendents must fashion a solution out of three sometimes-conflicting roles: instructional, managerial, and political. As instructional leaders, they bear ultimate responsibility for improving student achievement. As managerial leaders, they have to keep their districts operating efficiently, with a minimum of friction, yet taking risks to make necessary changes. As political leaders, they have to negotiate with multiple stakeholders to get approval for programs and resources.

All the roles are apparently necessary. Susan Moore Johnson (1996) found the same three themes in her indepth study of superintendents, as did Nancy Nestor-Baker and Wayne Hoy (2001). The latter study also found that superintendents spent the most time thinking about the interpersonal dimensions of their political and managerial roles, especially in dealing with the board.

Board relationships are a continuing issue for district leaders. Despite theoretical clarity in the division of labor (the board sets policy and the superintendent executes it), the practical application is much more ambiguous. Although boards accept most of their administrators' policy recommendations (Glass and colleagues), superintendents have to work hard to frame issues in a way that will garner majority support. Whereas 93 percent of the superintendents Glass (2001) surveyed reported a collaborative relationship with the board, 70 percent believed the current governance structure should be restructured or replaced.

How Will the ESEA Reauthorization Change the Work of Superintendents?

The recent ESEA reauthorization puts federal teeth into standards-based accountability. Testing will become an annual

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event; states must define "adequate yearly progress" to measure success; and schools failing to meet the standard will face a variety of consequences. While these changes will not eliminate the superintendent's political, managerial, or instructional roles, they are likely to alter them in significant ways.

First, the new law will widen the gap between accountability and authority. The expectations are higher and very explicit, and superintendents will be under heavy pressure to keep districts on track. The new ESEA does little, however, to enhance the superintendent's authority. In fact, the law strengthens deregulation by mandating various kinds of parental choice in schools that fail to demonstrate adequate yearly progress. In addition, corrective actions for low-performing schools must be based on "scientifically based research," adding another layer to the decision-making process and conceivably limiting the options available to districts.

Second, the new law will heighten the superintendent's instructional role. District administrators have typically been expected to set a tone that honors and supports classroom instruction, but they have often done so in ways that are symbolic or abstract. The new expectations will require an indepth understanding of instructional strategies, coaching techniques, and use of data to guide decision-making (Katy Anthes 2002). This does not require superintendents to immerse themselves in the details of instructional planning and execution, but they must be knowledgeable enough to hold principals and teachers accountable for effective practice.

Third, the new law may affect the superintendent's relationship with the board. District leaders serve at the pleasure of the board, and must continually work to maintain credibility and support. In most cases this is a highly interactive and personal process, based more on relationships and impressions than on tangible criteria (Johnson). However, ESEA's "adequate yearly progress" standard is specific, objective, and highly visible, with the outcome having major consequences for the district. It will likely play a central role in the board's evaluation of the superintendent.

How Do Superintendents Act as Instructional Leaders?

While recent reform efforts have been focused at the school level, there is growing evidence that districts can play a crucial role in improvement. Julie Marsh (2000) notes that the district is the link that connects the state, individual schools, and the community. On the one hand, it can ignore, resist, or re-interpret state policy. At the same time, it is the crucial agent in mobilizing the human, social, and physical capital needed to make major changes.

Johnson found that effective instructional leadership required a clear instructional vision but that "good ideas, in themselves, never carried the day." Superintendents were dependent on principals and teachers to actually carry out the vision and were most successful when they could elicit commitment from the staff. They did this by providing resources, buffering staff from outside meddling, being visible, engaging others in conversation about instruction, and empowering collaborative risk taking.

By focusing professional development on instructional issues and basing principal evaluation on instructional improvement, superintendents can create powerful learning communities within their districts. Without attempting to micromanage classrooms, district leaders can be firm in asserting the instructional agenda and aligning the organization to support it.

How Can the Superintendent's Role Be Strengthened?

The evolving role of the superintendent presents challenges for universities, policymakers, researchers, school boards, and superintendents themselves.

Universities should revise preparation programs to provide district leaders with the knowledge and skills needed to create well-focused learning organizations. Superintendents need a thorough grounding in the complexities of today's instructional leadership; a few courses in curriculum and supervision will no longer do the job.

Policymakers and researchers should explore ways to bring better balance into the accountability-authority equation. The radical instructional improvement demanded by the new ESEA will require strong leadership at the district level.

School boards should work closely with superintendents to clarify their expectations for performance and evaluation. Without strong and highly visible board support, district administrators will be preoccupied with shoring up their political base and thus unlikely to take the bold steps needed for transforming schools.

Superintendents should put instruction at the top of the district's agenda. While the managerial and political dimensions of the job will not go away, those roles should be aligned with the overriding goal of continuous instructional improvement.

As long as the push for standards-based accountability remains strong, district leaders can expect a turbulent and stressful job climate. At the same time, superintendents continue to find creative responses to the challenge. If the current situation is a crisis, it is the kind of crisis that energizes rather than paralyzes.

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